UNITED NATIONS

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/CONF.157/PC/24/Add.1
25 March 1992

Original: ENGLISH

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Preparatory Committee
Second session
Geneva, 30 March-10 April 1992
Item 5 of the provisional agenda

PROVISIONAL AGENDA FOR THE WORLD CONFERENCE AND RELATED DOCUMENTATION

Recommendations to the World Conference on Human Rights and its preparation submitted pursuant to paragraph 10 of General Assembly resolution 45/155

Report of the Secretary-General

CONTENTS

Page

RECOMMENDATIONS SUBMITTED BY NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN CONSULTATIVE STATUS

International Federation on Ageing .....

GE.92-11848/9211a

Age discrimination - a necessary theme for the World Conference on Human Rights

1. The subject of age discrimination is a relative newcomer on the international and, in most cases, the national human rights scene. Age is one of the few categories not specifically listed in international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as deserving special protection.

2. The reasons for this are several. It is only very recently that the world has awakened to the historic phenomenon of global population ageing, resulting in the elderly constituting the fastest-growing age group in the population of most developed and developing nations. The appearance of advocacy organizations representing the interests of the elderly at the national and international levels is likewise a relatively recent development.

3. At the same time, philosophically, "ageism", as both de jure and de facto forms of age discrimination have been called, has been considered a lesser evil - one that is less pervasive and debilitating than other forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism. However, "ageism, like racism or sexism, segregates on the basis of a characteristic - one which the individual has neither chosen nor has the power to change". 1/ Nor is age discrimination any different from other forms of discrimination in the impact it has on the lives of older persons. The existence of compulsory retirement policies, for example, relegates many to spending their remaining years in absolute or relative poverty and prevents them from exercising their creative and productive skills for the benefit of society. (It also violates article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which establishes the right to work.)

4. The effect of ageism goes beyond its direct impact on older persons. "Ageism" allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus, they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings." 2/ (This behaviour, in turn, guarantees their own neglect in old age.)

5. Ageism is a serious issue for both developed and developing countries. While mandatory retirement policies, for example, at this point affect a proportionately greater number of persons in industrialized than in developing nations, the relegation of older persons to the sidelines of the development process reflects a similar insensitivity on the part of developing nations to the contribution elders can still make to their communities.

6. Fortunately, concern for the rights of older persons is rising. While only the United States, at this time, has enacted national legislation specifically prohibiting age discrimination in employment and mandatory retirement for most categories of work, the American experience with this piece of legislation has attracted the attention of legislators and policy makers worldwide. In December 1991, the United Nations General Assembly

approved by consensus a set of United Nations Principles for Older Persons which, in 18 principles, assures older persons of the world independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity.

7. However, progress against age discrimination will remain a difficult struggle for many years. For this reason, the International Federation on Ageing urges the Preparatory Committee for the World Conference on Human Rights to include ageing as part of the agenda for the World Conference.

Notes

1/ H. Eglit, 3 Age Discrimination 1-4 (United States, 1986).

2/ R.N. Butler, Why Survive?: Being Old in America 11 (1975); see also S. de Beauvoir, Coming of Age (1973).